

# Gabriel

Meet Gabriel. 18 years old. Born into a neighborhood called the Square, rated the most criminally driven square mile in our city. His family was the core of a well-known gang in the area. Violence was part of his culture, his heritage. He witnessed his first murder at the age of seven when his uncle brought him to an execution. Apparently, someone had to pay for betraying his family.

His face displayed the scars of confrontation and survival in his life.

Teens at school respected and feared him. Gabriel insisted on privacy.

Today was different. It would be a matter of life or death. There was no choice. He had to trust someone. Gabriel checked the hallway on either side, walked into my office, closed the door behind him and sat down. Without hesitation he said, "We're bringing guns to school tomorrow."

"There are two gangs who are ready to fight it out," he began...

I could hardly process what he was saying.

A dozen plans flew through my mind; nothing seemed capable of stopping this. Time was of the essence.

"What should we do?" I asked.

He simply said, "Both groups need to talk."

He asked if I would approach the other gang leader, Ricardo, and tell him that Gabriel had told me about the guns, the plan. He explained that I needed to remind Ricardo that school is always considered neutral territory. Too many friends and family could be hurt. They had to find another way to work this out.

"Tell him," he said, "that I am offering him my respect by meeting with him and his boys. I will bring mine, too. We need to make this stop."

"Only two counselors are allowed to be present," he continued. "No administration. No security." We agreed that each side could bring five members to the mediation. He had to guarantee that no one would carry any type of weapon.

"Of course," he said, "that's understood."

The plan was in place. I would meet both groups of boys at the front office at lunch time and take them into the conference room where Ms. Miller would be waiting. The administration and security agreed to keep their distance.

There was no doubt that we were under close watch.

Minutes dragged on until 12 o'clock arrived. The office was intense. Everyone pretended that it was a normal day. It wasn't. This was not school. This was about survival.

The boys were waiting. An invisible line was drawn between the groups. Their body language said it all. Most had arms crossed, standing tall, breathing intolerance with serious, intense expressions. No talking. No comments. No movement.

Their leaders, Gabriel and Ricardo nodded and then both groups followed me down the hall. A single line on either side. By then, all personnel were cleared out of the area.

When I opened the doors to the conference room, we were caught by surprise. The principal knew it was lunch and he knew boys. Their first priority is always food. And he was right. They were hungry. Boys are always hungry.

And for just a few moments, the boys seemed to forget that today was supposed to be about violence and revenge. Nachos, burgers and pizza, fries and chips, sodas and ice-cream bars covered the table that was centered in the room.

The tension de-escalated. I even heard someone laughing.

Fifteen minutes later the mediation began.

There were simple rules. Each group would speak for three minutes. There would be no signs, posturing, comments or looks of disrespect. Any person with attitude would need to leave the room. Both groups sat at least fifteen feet apart.

All conversations would be controlled. Voice levels would remain calm. Questions would be held until it was time for that group's turn to speak.

After they agreed to the rules, I said nothing from this point forward.

Gabriel led the way. I wondered how they would begin, but they seemed to have their own agenda ready. Both groups focused on the who, the what, the why and the how. Their initial argument surfaced and was discussed. Their conversations brought forth the members involved, the proof, the hearsay, the players, the escalation and the reality and final truth of what was really going on. Each side used their time fairly. Various members took turns speaking. Every young man demonstrated complete control and maturity. No one could have resolved this as well as the two groups did.

All of the young men finally agreed that the problem was not about one gang disrespecting another, but about a girl that two guys liked, one from each gang. Because of too much "talk" and drama, the disagreement turned into guns and violence.

Everyone seemed relieved when the mediation was over. There would be no fight, no weapons, and no stand-off. The mediation took 40 minutes, which included the time for lunch. Both groups agreed to talk to the boys involved insisting that they end this fight.

The boys exited through the doorway keeping a safe distance from each other. They weren't friendly, but the hostility had lessened. The atmosphere continued to relax as their voices echoed through the halls. Everyone headed toward their lockers and on to their next class.

Gabriel caught my eye and nodded. I was deeply impressed by his sense of responsibility and courage. There was no doubt that he had empowered both gangs to find a way out and still maintain their personal pride.

Yet, there was still a final moment that said it all.

One of the guys ran up behind a member from the opposing gang and put his hand on his shoulder. "Wait up, man. Just for a minute."

When they faced each other, he said, "Hey Miguel, remember when we were kids...we always rode bikes together...we had crazy times, right?" Miguel slowly nodded, "Yeah, man, that was when life was easy. We just didn't know how good we had it, did we?"

Gabriel's example of mediation and communication became the model for conflict resolutions long after he graduated. His legacy to keep campus a neutral territory continues to save lives today.

**Your thoughts: (no names or places)**

**Is violence a reality on most campus? Give some examples.**

**Is violence a part of every teen's life? How?**

**Are some teens afraid to come to school? Why?**

**How are major conflicts usually resolved at school? Give examples.**

**Thoughts about Gabriel**

**Are there leaders like Gabriel on your campus? Do you think that they would take charge of a situation like he did?**

**There are all types of leaders. Some lead through direction, others through example, still some lead through intimidation and others through their silence. What kind of leader do you respect?**

**Does a person with Gabriel's background have a way out of his life, his environment, his family's history?**

**What could the world learn from Gabriel that could make it a better place?**

**Can all teens be empowered to lead others? How?**

**Like the two teens at the end of the story, do you look back at your past and wish that you were still a little kid? What is better about being young?**